

## THE HISTORY OF TIREE IN 100 OBJECTS - no. 75

### DEFENCE MEDAL

The Defence Medal was awarded in 1945 for three years non-operational service during the Second World War. It was given to those who had served in the Home Guard, worked in military headquarters, and manned First Aid posts and air raid shelters, as well as to firemen, policemen and coastguards.

The Home Guard, initially known as the Local Defence Volunteers, was set up in 1940 as fears of an imminent German invasion heightened. The War Office gave the idea a cool reception at first, worried about exactly what the new force would be asked to do, how it would fit in with the regular army, and a looming national shortage of uniforms and rifles. But as scores of unregulated local private militias began to set themselves up around the country, the government had no option but to agree. Within a week, a quarter of a million volunteers between the ages of 17 and 65 had signed up. Those who were too old to be enlisted into the regular forces (men over forty-one) were encouraged to join, as were those in reserved occupations, like crofters and agricultural labourers over the age of twenty-five. At its peak, the force had one and a half million volunteers in uniform. But keeping the new volunteers equipped with a weapon of sorts was a challenge, and only half the men had a rifle at the end of the first year of operation. The late David McClounnan of Balephuill remembered joining the Home Guard in 1941: "Two men came in, and we had to be at this school down at Balemartine. And there was a big meeting there that night, talking about the thing before the Home Guard started. The next week after that, a drill came up and they were telling us the way we were to act and slope arms and all that carry on. We got suits, you know, the khaki suit, and one of the round bonnets with a Glengarry thing on it. Everything was inside this big bag we got. And we got forty shots, two packets of shots. They were old, heavy, bolt-action rifles."

John Brown, the owner of the Temperance Hotel in Scarinish was initially in charge, with detachments based in Balemartine, Scarinish, Ruaig, the Reef and Kilkenneth. Ian MacLaren, the estate's factor during the war, became the commanding officer with the rank of lieutenant, with the gamekeeper, Jock Graham, as his deputy. A sense of humour was never far away, as David remembered: "We were all in room in Balemartine School. This is where the laugh was, all the same. We were all so stupid about the thing at the start. When he would say: 'About turn! To the left turn! To the right turn!' So when you were turned to the right, you knew where the right was anyhow. And the old fellows were standing in front of each other. One would turn this way and the other; they were facing each other! He would stop you like that: clap! So he would shout a bit and put the old blokes together, so he was showing them the way to turn, all this carry on ... They were having a good laugh."

An important role of the new force on Tiree was to protect the airfield, keeping watch at night from a number of lookouts: the *dùn* at Caolas, *Dùn Eibrig* in Baugh, MacCallum's cairn in Kilkenneth and the Signal Tower in Hynish. David McClounnan recalled: "You weren't to leave the place until six o'clock in the morning. And you were to go down with these papers. You wouldn't be putting [no]thing down at all because they would be thinking you were sleeping. Because there would be lookout on the other sides; you would be found out. You had to put something on. There used to be fishing boats. There was a light here, there. These convoys were going round at that time. You'd have to report that: how many was there and that. But otherwise there was nothing. When your week was up, the other two was going on the next week, and it was carrying on like that until your turn would come again."

Duncan MacPhee, Scarinish remembered one evening: "We had night exercises, but after a day's work you weren't very fit for exercises, I'm telling you! We were on night duty once a week. And this night Donald MacIntyre was along with me at [the Reading Room]. We were supposed to keep an eye on the shore, to patrol there. At this dark night we heard something and we flattened down and saw a black [shape]. We thought it might be a submarine going to sabotage the aerodrome. It was a sheep!"

The Home Guard had a serious purpose. One of these on Tiree was combatting a possible a submarine-borne German commando raid on the airport. In 1944, a document listed their duties in this eventuality: 'Battle Platoon 1: Ruaig, 16 men (to defend Ruaig Naval wireless station); Platoon 2: Scarinish, 14 (to defend fuel tanks); Platoon 3: Reef, 18 (assist RAF in defence of airfield); Platoon 4: Balemartine, 18 (mobile – to prevent enemy landing parties from regaining beaches for re-embarkation); Platoon 5: Kilkenneth, 20 (protection of AME stations). Total 86.' The likely landing places for raids were thought to be Gott and Balephuill bays: 'It is considered that the best means of defence will be to defeat the enemy on his withdrawal when he is carrying the secrets.'

During one training session in Scarinish School in 1944, Sergeant Jock Graham accidentally let off a pistol, with the bullet going through stovepipe, shattering the glass partition and damaging the wall plaster. No one was hurt. Caricatured as 'Dad's Army', the island's Home Guard memorably beat RAF Tiree in a shooting match on the Heylipol firing range.

Sandy Campbell, from Millport, Hynish, was one of several islanders to win the Defence Medal. His commanding officer in Dunoon wrote him this letter: 'May I, on behalf of the Argyll, Territorial and Auxiliary Forces Association, which administered the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Argyllshire Battalions, the Home Guard, thank you very much for the services you rendered to the County at the time of need, and congratulate you on the award which is now being forwarded to you.'

Dr John Holliday